

George Tames
Washington Photographer for the *New York Times*

Interview #2:
A Creature of *The New York Times*
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TAMES: Last night was the night I did the Dave Letterman show. That was a complete surprise to me to be asked. I had only seen that show once or twice and I felt that it was slanted toward the young college student and younger audience. To have a fellow like myself who's approaching seventy to appear, what could I say to these young ones? I'd start talking about Dirksen or Kennedy and they were not even born when I took those pictures!

One of the pictures that we were looking at, prior to going on, was a picture of Jacqueline Kennedy and the president. Letterman was tempted to make a few remarks along that line, and I was talking not to Letterman but to his producer, and I told him very simply that as far as I was concerned, Jacqueline Kennedy had paid her dues to this world when she stood tall during and after the president's assassination. I'll never forget her, as long as I live, the night when they brought the president's body back, and I was at Andrews /Air Force Base/, in the spotlights, agonizing, feeling loss at the death of the president, who I felt was my president. He was only two years older than me, and I felt that for the first time we were going to take over, we young people were going to take over the world from the old ones. And here my president was dead, and who was going to succeed him but another old bugger, Lyndon Johnson. Here I was feeling sorry for myself and for the world, and the doors opened on the airplane's cargo side, and this forklift goes up to get the president's body, and there stood Mrs. Kennedy in the doorway, her husband's brains still spattered on her dress. I thought right away: there she is, the perfect symbol of all the women of the world from the dawn of history who have watched their husbands and sons go off to war, and have seen them brought home on their shields, and have lamented, and washed them, and buried them, and then carried on.

She was a symbol when we needed her. Occasionally she was theatrical, sure. The gesture of John-John saluting was Mrs. Kennedy's doing. Caroline kissing her father's casket in the Rotunda of the Capitol, that was her prompting. But those were gestures that we needed, and it really helped us in our grief. So as far as I'm concerned, I don't care what happened to Jacqueline after, or Onassis, or whatever she's gotten into. As far as I'm concerned, she was there when we needed. So I'll say, "Here's to you, Jackie. Grab life's brass ring and go ahead." That's the way I feel.

RITCHIE: Didn't she start out as an inquiring photographer?

TAMES: Oh, she started out as an inquiring photographer at the *Washington Times*, the Hearst Paper. Because Mrs. /Eleanor/ Patterson was an old family friend of the Bouviers', they gave

her a job, just to have her do something. They made an inquiring photographer out of her. She was never one to mix with the other staffers. There was no question that she was on her own. There are very many amusing stories involving her. The first time that one of her pictures appeared in her column, the other photographers said: you should buy us a drink. From what I understand, she went out and bought a quart of milk, to tease these fellows.

I always had a lot of fun with her. She had her own favorite photographers and she had her own ideas about what made the best picture of herself. She followed pretty well in that line, and we just had to go along with her. She played the role of First Lady to the hilt, and used the children as part of the family image of the president. I'll never forget the pictures of her on the south lawn on the first snow, the first year they were in the White House, when she took the children out on a sled. She had pony and sled take them around the White House. That was a nice little gesture. Only Jacqueline could have thought of something like that. And the president indulged her. He was very proud of what she was doing. He looked at her and smiled, knowing that she was doing this to further his image also.

RITCHIE: Had you know them during their Senate years?

TAMES: Yes I had. I had known Jack Kennedy since he was a member of the House, and as a senator. I campaigned with him and knew him all the way to the presidency. I felt at ease around him. I used to save up all my raunchiest jokes so that I could tell him. He'd love to hear them, and laugh. I'd even try to top Dave Powers sometimes, and he had quite a few. But it was a way of breaking the tension, and also being able to make some pictures at the same time.

I never tried to contact Jacqueline Kennedy after the president was assassinated and she moved to New York, because she seemed to be involved with Onassis, and involved with fights with press photographers, and I figured she had enough problems without me showing up and breaking down and crying when we started reminiscing about the president.

But I did see her in New York--I guess it's been eight or ten years now--at a ceremony. I shook hands and we sort of brushed cheeks, and I told her what I had been doing, not ignoring her but that I just didn't want to add to her problems. She said, "You should have called me and come up. We could reminisce." She said, "Jack loved you so. He would come up to my room and say that you'd been telling him jokes, and that you were incorrigible, and he would just laugh." I said, "I hope he never told you any of them!" She said, "No, he never told me those jokes." I said, "Well, thank God for little things." They weren't worth repeating, some of them.

RITCHIE: Was joking with someone like Kennedy a way of making him more at ease when you were photographing him?

TAMES: Oh, yes. Sure. With Senator [Howard] Baker, who's at the White House now, I

used the same thing. I wouldn't call it a technique, because I loved to tell jokes, and I love to hear jokes, and I love to see people react to them. And I'm always telling them. They do break the tension, there's no question about that. It's something that I've always done. I like it. It's just my way of life. I think that's one of the reasons I've kept my sanity. Two things have kept my sanity: one has been fishing, and the ability to get out and fight the elements by wading in the ocean waist deep and walking for miles pushing against the water, all your frustrations and tensions leave you. The other has been my sense of humor. I can retreat into my sense of humor and how tragically funny some of the events are that are shaping our lives. Thus I'm able to get over it.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm oversensitive. I look at my colleagues and I don't detect externally the same sensitivity. I don't hide my emotions. I like somebody, I like them, and I guess I can count on one hand the people that I disliked. And even those people that I've disliked I've found fine qualities even in them. Maybe that's one of my faults, that I see so much good in everyone. I'm willing to trust. I've been done in by it, and some people have fallen from my expectations. Maybe I've done the same thing, maybe I've fallen from others' expectations. But, by in large, it's been a good life. It's been rich, rewarding, stimulating. To be able to call the high and the mighty friends, that's pretty heady wine.

ITCHIE: I'd like to go back to when you were just getting started in the business. From talking to other people I've gotten the sense that for a lot of journalists, World War II opened a lot of doors. There was tremendous turnover and opportunities. You were just getting started at that stage.

TAMES: Yes, it was a great opportunity, there's no question about it. We were stagnant, the economy was stagnant, and there was just nothing, and then all of sudden: whamo it just opened up. There was demand for journalists like the demand for welders and every imaginable type of job. A lot of guys became writers who never thought about the business. A lot of photographers came out of the military. They were drafted and all of a sudden they said, "You're going to be a photographer." They handed him a camera and sent them to school for six weeks, and he came out supposedly taking pictures. A lot of those fellows followed through. I knew a lot of them during World War II and afterwards. A lot of them fell by the wayside in the photographic business, and a lot were killed.

ITCHIE: And a lot of the regular photographers went off to become war correspondents.

TAMES: Oh, yes. The ones who were a few years older than I was at the time. When the war broke out, I was twenty-one. Although that's fairly old, at least I thought it was fairly old, but if you've never had the educational background, it was still as if I was a high school student, when you consider the formal education. There was never any question of sending me as a writer. And by the time I started making some small reputation as a photographer, the only thing I could garner was a few trips up and down the East Coast classified as a war correspondent on some of the ships that were bringing oil up from Venezuela and Aruba.

So, yes, the war opened up great opportunities, particularly at the *New York Times*. The *New York Times* had sold its news photo service to A.P. in 1941, in the spring of '41, because the photo end was losing money at that point, and they had been carrying it for many, many years back to before World War I, and they sold it just at a time when the need for pictures was great. If they had kept their service, the *Times* photo service would be rival right now to A.P. and U.P., and I.N.P., which later folded and became U.P.I. When I came along, they asked me to open up a photo bureau in Washington, because they thought about the possibility of going national now that the war was over. They had seen the need for photos, and they thought this was going to continue. They tried it for five years, but the world economy was in such a state that there was just no way for us, *New York Times*, which was maintaining photo bureaus in Germany and in various countries of the world, to make any money. Not only were they not making any money, but they were losing money.

I'll never forget when one of our correspondents went overseas and went into Germany. He went into the *New York Times* bureau there, they just opened up a closet just full of German marks, because they couldn't take the money out. At least they could spend it; they could give it to the correspondents who wouldn't be spending U.S. currency. And there was no exchange really worth much.

So they decided to give it up. Plus the fact that the technical know-how was not there. The *New York Times* was trying to go national by using the wire photo machine, which is a technique that the *Times* helped develop. They totally owned a subsidiary which made the wire photo machines. The A.P. was using our machines. But the biggest piece of film that they could take was eleven by fourteen inches. The *Times* was thinking of printing that way, but they wanted to print it full size. They didn't want to go with a miniature. Unlike today, they push a button in New York and our satellite printer plants in Chicago, or L.A. or San Francisco, wherever they are, will immediately start rolling the same time the presses in New York are rolling, with the same copy, because it's all been sent by satellite. If we had had this technique available in '46 and '47, I think the *New York Times* would have gone national. We would have been the first truly national paper, way ahead of the *U.S.A. Today*, and a helluva lot different, I can assure you.

RITCHIE: But during the war you stayed with *Time-Life*?

TAMES: Yes, I stayed with the *Time-Life* bureau during the war, and developed the job of *Time* photographer. I was just hustling as much as I could, going out with the other photographers, George Scatti, Tom McEvoy, and all of the others who had come down on various trips from New York. I'd help them by carrying their gear, and making myself as useful as possible in the photographic end, because I looked upon the photographic end as something that could be done mechanically, with the little instrument, at the same time I could stay within this business and find a niche for myself, which was what I was really doing. Who knows, if the opportunity to become the office manager or the janitor of a *Time, Inc.* bureau had come along, I probably would have jumped at it, being unskilled.

But by the same token, I've always figured that I would have somehow or another come to the top, or near the top, of any profession or any group that I would have done in. I always figured that if I had gone into the Mafia, like a couple of my friends--who are now dead, by the way--that I would have either been the top don or encased in cement at the bottom of the Potomac. I always felt that I should be out front. When we had gang fights, I was the one who was always getting hit by the bricks. I was up in front, I wasn't in back. I was up in front to throw the first brick, or to take the brunt or the curse, or what have you. I felt that way all my life. I've always felt that one of my roles was to be the shield for less fortunates. Either they were less fortunate because they lacked the guts or the desire, or they just simply like the New Testament were the meek who were going to inherit the earth. I wasn't ready to inherit the earth. I wanted a little something else first.

RITCHIE: I'd think that would be a good attitude for a photographer, who would have to get in right up front to get pictures, and to go where you might be wanted at times.

TAMES: Oh, yes. No photographer has ever won the Pulitzer Prize by sitting on the deck of a battleship and watching the action through a pair of binoculars. You have to be in the front. One of my best little friends, he's now dead--that's one of the troubles when you start reaching the Biblical four-score-and-ten, that so many of your colleagues have left you. You start realizing that you're very fortunate to be here today. This poor fellow, we called him Buckwheat, he was in the navy. When they landed on one of the islands, he was a movie camera man, and he jumped into a shell hole, and then he got up and started running towards the Japanese lines, and all of a sudden he said he felt like he kept putting his foot in little holes. Finally when he looked down, half of his leg was gone. From the ankle down was gone. He was just bouncing along on a stump, he was so excited. It was only when he saw it that he felt the shock and the pain and he fell down. He put a tourniquet on there, and the medics got him. He got the purple heart. The war made a lot of heroes, and a lot of fellows who should have been heroes, but nobody heard about them.

RITCHIE: Did you find the same when you were covering political events? That you had to have some moxie to get inside?

TAMES: Oh, God, yes. If you weren't up on the political end of life, you'd miss it. You have to know the ballplayers. You have to know the scores, you have to know what they're batting. When a man comes up to bat, and he's a .210 hitter, you know how to play him in the infield. But when he's hitting .415, you know you've to back off, he's a heavy hitter. He doesn't hit them every time, but when he does they'll come out your way. You have to know just exactly how much weight they're pulling, how serious there presidential bids are, and what chances they have of making the presidency, or the vice presidency.

I was in Chicago in '52 during the Republican convention when Eisenhower was nominated. I just happened to be coming out of the Drake Hotel when Richard Nixon pulled up in a cab and jumped

out. "Hi, Senator," I said, "how are you doing?" He said, "Fine, how are things going?" I said, "Pretty good. They got this thing pretty well wrapped up. Ike is going to be the nominee, and they seem to be shuffling to find out who's going to be the vice presidential nominee." He said, "Who is going to be it?" I said, "Well, the betting seems to be /Henry Cabot/ Lodge." I think I mentioned one or two other names, but Lodge was the prime contender for vice president. But Nixon was not on that list. Nixon just nodded, and said, "Mmmmm-hmmmm." And he went on it. To this day, I've never asked him, but I always wanted to ask him, whether at that point he knew that he was under consideration or whether he was just feeling me out to see what I knew.

So you don't guess right all the time, but it's just like a commander going into a battle, unless he has some preconcept of what's going to happen and what forces he's going to face, he's out of it. You just don't show up with the army and say, "Well, what are we going to do?" I've seen photographers show up on a scene and say, "Well, what are we going to do?" Right now, when everything is being arranged so, we've become like Pavlov's dogs. We look around, and if there's no rope to get behind, we're lost! We don't know what to do! We're being restricted so that we're just like the animals in the zoo. They tell me that the guerrillas in the zoo look so ferocious, and he has these iron bars between you and him. You think they are there to protect you from him, and he's inside. He knows they're there to protect him from the people. It's just a question of how you look at these things.

Photography is just like anything else. You have to know what you are doing and angle your way. The picture I made of George Bush, where he's leaning against the dais of the renovated old Senate chamber, where they reenact the swearing in of the senators. I showed up late, and Bush had been swearing in and reenacting these, he had about twenty of them he had done already, and he had about four or five more to go. He was getting a little tired, and the other photographers there were getting a little tired. They were there to photograph every one. I walked in and greeted the vice president, and we were standing around. Then another senator came in and I watched the vice president go through his act. Then he backed up and put his back up against the dais, sort of rested a little bit, crossed his legs, and was sort of thinking. Gosh, looking at him dead ahead it was a good picture, but it didn't really mean much. But with my eye I was figuring, "If I went to the side, with those beautiful columns, and the juxtaposition of that, that would probably make a very dramatic shot."

So in order not to alert my colleagues, I sort of eased on over to the side a little bit, and when the next senator came in I did not photograph him. I went over to the side and I just stood there trying to be as nonchalant as possible. All of a sudden, after the ceremony was over, the vice president backed up and put his back against the dais, and crossed his legs, and sort of hung his head a wee bit, thinking. I lifted my camera, and wham, wham, I made two quick shots. The moment my motor went off, all the other photographers' heads popped up. When they saw where I was, and where he was standing, they all came running around to my side. Immediately, I broke the spell by yelling: "Mr. Vice President!" He looked up and he smiled, and broke that whole mood.

There's something else, how some people see things in pictures that even the photographer who made it doesn't see. When the vice president would walk toward the dais, he had the Bible in his hand, and he'd put it on the dais, and then he'd turn his back and lean against it. You could see the Bible there if you looked. I received a letter from a fundamentalist preacher from down here in Virginia, in which he asked for a copy of the picture. I sent it to him, and he said the reason he wanted it was that Bush was going to be the next president of the United States, because he had God behind him. Look where the Bible was! Well, that was his interpretation. Be that as it may.

RITCHIE: Covering the Congress strikes me as presenting a lot of difficulties for a photographer. The chamber is off-limits to photographers, many of the committees met in closed session when you first came there. The corridors of the Capitol are very dark. How did you get started getting a feel for photographing members of Congress under those limitations?

TAMES: When I first started up there the whole Congress was off-limits. In '38 and '39 the photographers were literally sitting on their camera boxes on the Senate side of the Capitol, down by the steps, and watching members as they walked over from the Old Senate Office Building, which is the Russell Building today. Coming toward them, they would photograph them. All the corridors were off-limits. All committees were off-limits. Only at the discretion of the chairman were you allowed in, and you were allowed in for just enough time to make one or two shots and then get out. This was carried on all through the post-war period until television started breaking down the barriers. By that time, the still photographers had broken down the barriers in the majority of the committees, but there were still a few committees that were being chaired by senators who had been there quite a few years, who did not want photographers to be operating freely. Judiciary was one of them. Ways and Means on the House side was another one. But with the advent of television, these committees have opened up.

In a way, I approve of the opening up of the committees, because I don't think there's any such thing as too much information in a democracy. This is one way that everyone can participate in a democratic system, by listening and watching the Congress in session. By the same token, there is a tendency on the part of some members, that is hard to suppress, to showboat. They will posture and they will become extra verbal, what do you call that?

RITCHIE: Verbose.

TAMES: They become more verbose. It's a tendency that I deplore. It turns me off. They're playing for home, I guess.

And you mentioned about the corridors--yes, it was difficult, much more difficult than today. Today: one, there is a lot better lighting; and two, the films and cameras are so much better. If we had had the films and cameras then that we have today, even if we didn't have the light, we'd have still been able to operate a lot better than we did. I understand that Eastman Kodak is coming out with a film

that is 3600 ASA. Three thousand six hundred ASA! Do you know what you can do with that? You could walk out in the middle of the night, anywhere, and make pictures as if it was daylight. You don't need any light, very low light, to shoot at that high ASA rating.

But slowly we worked on the chairmen of the committees. The old-timer photographers would work on the chairmen, or on the senior opposition party members. If the Democrats were in power, we'd always make a point of going over to the Republicans, so that they understood our problems. We tried to tell them that what we were doing was helpful to them, and to the legislative process. Slowly they started letting us in, to make the opening for three or four minutes, or until some member objected, or mentioned to the chairman that it was time for the photographers to go. We would pack up and go, there was never any question about it. But slowly they opened up. Foreign Relations was one of the first. Harry Truman, to his credit, his War Investigating Committee was open all the time.

We do sometimes make a theater of a very serious hearing; that's the nature of our business, I guess, today. But with new equipment, there's really no need for lights, there's really no need for that theatrical atmosphere. You can operate and work just as well without it. Then you come into the prima donnas of the networks. The moment they start getting long in the tooth, and want to look their best on TV, they need light. You have to have the flattering light. You can't stand in the corridor with crisscrossed lighting, and you look like something out of the Hound of the Baskervilles. One of the ways we used to make pictures in the old days of a rapist or a murderer in a jail cell, and he agrees, instead of shooting straight on or holding the light high, so you're imitating sunlight, you hold the camera to your eye and put the light down by your crotch, or lower by your knees, and shoot up. Oh, that makes him look terrible! He looks like something sinister. Well, that was a technique. I might say, we never did that with any member of Congress. At least I never, and I don't recall any of my colleagues ever doing that, not even to Joe McCarthy or Bilbo, or some of the ones we started feeling real personal animosity towards.

By and large, what we had going for us was the fact that we were part and parcel of the media, but at the same time we were not crucifying the individuals by writing about them, or trying to dig up something that would be a problem. I've seen many a member, either in a nightclub or even in the Senate dining room having a meal with someone of the opposite sex, or with a lobbyist, or someone who would make him look bad, or raise a question. I have looked at them, and they have given me the slightest nod of their head: no. And I have just gone on. If I had been a reporter, I'm sure that I would have just barged right in and started asking questions. But I've always played it that way, as long as they're playing fair on the Senate floor.

It's just like /Gary/ Hart right now saying, "If I become president, I won't be the first adulterer in the White House." He's missing the mark there. That's not the issue at all. He's probably right, I'm sure he is, but just because he's going to pick someone whose personal social habits might be deplorable, that doesn't mean then that he'll drop himself to that common denominator and

expect to be elected. It's one thing for me to vote for you when I don't know it, and another thing when I do know it. But I do want to know, and I'll make my own judgment. They say, "Well, you don't want to vote for him because he's a homosexual." I say, "Be that as it may. Are we voting for him to be school superintendent or scoutmaster? Or are we voting for him to be fire chief or to be a member of Congress? I want to know, and I want to be able to use my own judgment. After all, whether consciously or subconsciously, we are all preachers of our basic instincts, for want of a better word. I sometimes wish I had a better command of the English language. Sometimes I can't say some of the things I want to say, I just can't seem to be able to put it in words. But anyway.

RITCHIE: I was interested about the old-time senators from the '40s. I've seen a lot of the still pictures of them, and they always look very formal. I saw one of Tom Connally, where behind him you could see his cigar on the edge of his desk. He had obviously taken it out of his mouth and stuck it back there so it wouldn't be in the picture.

TAMES: That's correct. He didn't want to be photographed with his cigar in his mouth. When he was chairman of the committee, we photographers once crowded around a witness and fired away with our flashbulbs. Finally the witness complained: "Mr. Chairman, can you get these photographers to stop? They are disturbing me with their flashes. They're blinding me." So Connally, with his cigar in his hand--he always kept it below the table; he would puff on it, and then drop his cigar down--he took his cigar in his hand and sort of waved at the photographers and said, "You photographers, you can click but you can't bulb!"

We photographers, when we had just a little time, when we were pressed, we had to get a little action out of the witness. We would say, "Sir, would you say something? Would you wave your arms?" They'd say, "What am I going to say?" I'd say, "Say anything, say walawalawawala." And they'd go "walawalawala." And bang, bang, bang, we'd get them. But you only got one exposure off. You had it if you had it, or you if you didn't have it you didn't have it.

There were some witnesses that just wouldn't bend. Dean Acheson was one who was very proper, always dressed immaculately. His little mustache would twitch as he stood there in front of the committee. Al Muto, who was a photographer for I.N.P., was covering Dean Acheson one day. They were leaning across the desk, and saying, "Mr. Secretary, would you do something? Do something, Mr. Secretary. Make a gesture. Do something!" And he wouldn't do anything. He just looked at Al. Al had a short fuse anyway, he got so angry he finally leaned over and he grabbed his Speed-Graphic in one hand and with his other hand he started patting his Speed-Graphic, /bang, bang, bang/, patting it like that and saying: "Mr. Secretary" /bang, bang, bang/, "I make my living from this." /bang, bang, bang/. He said, "My wife and my daughter get their bread and butter from this." /bang, bang, bang/.

All the while, Dean Acheson was looking up at him. Then he said: "What do you wish me to

do, take up a collection?" With that, Muto straightened up, and he was struck dumb. He didn't know what to say. Little Frank Cancellare, who was a U.P. photographer at that time, grabbed Al by the arm and said, "Come on, Al, let's go. You lost that round." Al went outside the committee room and said, "I am going to go back and take this camera and smash it in his face! I'm going to wait till he comes out of that committee room and I'm going to deck him!" Frank Cancellare said, "Al, take it easy. There's no doubt in my mind that you can whip him physically. But please, don't trade wits!"

RITCHIE: Do you feel that politicians in those days were stiffer, and wanted to appear more formal?

TAMES: No, I don't think they were stiffer. It's just that the means of recording them was stiffer. I look back at some of the old five-by-seven inch pieces of film, and before that glass plates, in the five-by-seven Graphflexs. When they got the four-by-five Graphflexes they thought they were improving. And a Graphflex is when you look down into the hood. You're blind to everything else. You could get kicked by a horse and never know it, because you don't see anything coming. All you're doing is looking down into that one little reflex. It's pretty hard. A good example of this is Abraham Lincoln. Have you ever seen a picture of him smiling? No. And you're never going to see a picture of him smiling. Because in order for Matthew Brady to make an expression, he had a minimum of one minute. When you have a film where the ASA was so slow, you had to be in bright sun, for a long time. So politicians who were raised in an era of the first Kodaks, starting in the 1880, 1890s, and 1900s, in spite of everything, you got a blur if you moved too fast, even when you were using flash. So they had a tendency to pose. You had to keep telling them to relax. That's why the advent of the 35mm camera, where they didn't even know they were being photographed, ended up making the best candid shots.

Show biz that has taken over politics by and large. It used to be that maybe ten percent of the members had an instinctive show biz mentality. General Patton, say for example, General MacArthur, Montgomery, various generals during the war between the states, the Confederate cavalry general who wore the feathers in his hat, they had a sense of drama, and by priming themselves and making themselves outstanding that way, their followers noticed them, and appreciated them. "Good old Monty," and General Patton with his pearl handled pistols, and the general in Korea who carried the grenades on his chest, a couple of belts of grenades. These people cause others to look at them. Your politician, in his way, is starting to learn to do that, to attract attention.

It's just Senator /Alben/ Barkley's favorite story about the mule skinner who was cited for being one of the humane of the mule-breakers, because he broke thousands of mules just by whispering into their ears. Barkley told this story, and I remember the first time I heard him I just broke out laughing. A delegation from the humane society went over to see him in action and give him a plaque. To demonstrate his technique, he went down to the paddock where the mules were, and the first thing this fellow did was to pick up a two-by-four, go to the nearest mule and whop him across the head. The

poor mule went down on his knees, and his eyes were crossed. Then he just gently picked up one ear and started whispering: "You want me to do this again?" And the humane society people were horrified. They said, "What are you doing?" He said, "Well, first I want to get their attention." Well, you get the attention of the people by posing this way.

RITCHIE: Did you find that there were some politicians who went out of their way to pose for the pictures, or tried to present this image?

TAMES: Oh, yes. They learned very early like Hubert Humphrey, he used to make a big joke out of it, we knew that. If you were in a group of five or six senators and we form a circle of pro and con, or a group talking, the ones on the end stand a good chance of being cropped out. So Hubert always made it a point of being in the center. He also made it a point of carrying the action by waving his arms and talking. That way, the reader's eyes go directly to the one who's doing the acting, or making the motions. The first thing you know, all the senators started learning that. So you'd get five of them waving their arms at the same time. They looked like a bunch of windmills in Holland. But Hubert always used to get in the center, or if he couldn't get in the center he'd go around the back and stick his head between two others in the center where they couldn't crop him out.

RITCHIE: I've heard that Nixon was a pointer, that he used to point his finger at people while he was talking.

TAMES: Oh, yes. In fact, he used to point and poke, poke you in the belly, right in your bellybutton. This way, you kept backing up. One time I was photographing Hubert Humphrey in President Kennedy's office, and the president said, "Wait till I'm ready, George." And then he said, "I'm ready now." He buttoned his coat, and then he went up to Hubert and took his finger and started poking Hubert right in the bellybutton. Hubert started backing up and saying, "For Christ's sake, Jack, what are you doing?" The president said, "Just a little trick I picked up from Nixon. Not only do you keep him off balance, but you upstage him." Then they laughed and I went on to make my shots.

RITCHIE: During the war you stayed with *Time-Life*, covering mostly Washington, and then in 1945 you went to the *New York Times*.

TAMES: Right.

RITCHIE: How did that switch come about?

TAMES: I had been doing some free lance work for the *Times* magazine, and I happened to be New York to see the people at *Time* and *Life* about my future. The war was over, and I was still an office boy. I was shooting pictures, but I was still classified as an office boy. By that time I was getting paid forty-five dollars a week, but I was getting twenty dollars for every picture of mine that

appeared in *Time* and forty dollars for every picture that appeared in *Life*. I thought I was the hottest thing that ever came down the pike, and I went up to ask about being put on the staff. I still had some enemies up there, people who just couldn't conceive of a person of limited formal education like I had to be able to come to the top without going through all the steps. I could understand how they felt. They didn't encourage me, but they didn't discourage me either over at *Time, Inc.* There was one fellow, Bob Boyd, who was picture editor of *Time*. He kept trying to get me on, but he couldn't get it through the hierarchy up there.

So I went over to the *New York Times*, to see them and meet some of the people that I'd been doing some work for. While I was there, I was offered a job on the *New York Times*. I told them that I didn't know, because I was a magazine photographer, and being a photographer on a paper would be a step down in the hierarchy. The magazine photographers were the tops. I don't know, I didn't particularly care for newspapers in general. Also, I had heard that they paid notoriously low. I needed to make at least a hundred dollars a week, because I was thinking about getting married. They said, "You're shooting pretty high." I said, "Well, I need that kind of money." So the next thing I know, they offered me a job in the Washington bureau. I said, "I'll take it under the conditions that I get paid a hundred dollars, and I'll stay in Washington." Well, I got a call from the *New York Times* the next morning saying could I come back up to New York, because the publisher wanted to talk to me. I said, "Sure, if you pay the expenses." They said they would pay it. It cost around thirty-five dollars to go up and back on the train.

I went up to New York, and was ushered into Mr. /Arthur/ Sulzberger, who proceeded to talk to me about how the plans were to go national, and to put plants here and there and go be a national paper. What did I think of it? I said, I thought a hundred dollars was not too much money. We talked a little longer, and he said, "We'll let you know." So I got a call the next morning from the director of photography telling me that they were offering me a job at a hundred dollars a week, and that I was to have the title of National Photo Correspondent for the *New York Times*. I said fine. I didn't even know what a National Photo Correspondent meant, but it sounded good. So I accepted. I submitted my resignation over at *Time, Inc.*, and boy they got upset at that. I said, "Well, I've been waiting all this time." They made me a counteroffer to keep me on. I said, "How much are you going to pay me?" They said, "We haven't got that down." Well, needless to say, they hired a photographer for two hundred dollars a week after I left. But they hired one who had a little more experience than I did. But if they had paid me two hundred dollars I would have stayed there. I wouldn't have gone to the *New York Times*, and I wouldn't be here talking to you, I don't believe. Although, I don't know, you can never say, the varied experiences I've had.

Although *Time, Inc.* is a great company and has great people working for it, I think that by far and large the *New York Times* has the greatest reporting staff, and the greatest and finest writers and personalities that I have ever run into in my life. I was very privileged, at a young and impressive age, to literally sit at the feet of Mr. /Arthur/ Krock, Scotty Reston, Tom Wicker, Johnny Apple. These

people have always influenced me, because I read the paper quite religiously, and know them by their writings. I've always considered myself a creature of the *New York Times*. If any species were to be created called creature of the *New York Times*, it would have to be me. I came to the *Times* without any background, without anything other than the fact that I could operate this little instrument called a camera. You could be the dumbest person in the world, but when you're immersed in this intellectual ooze that's the *New York Times* Washington bureau, you just cannot help acquiring some measure of culture and education. It's impossible, if you don't get it through your brain you get it through osmosis. So I've always been very grateful to the *Times*, because looking back sometimes I was not quite as good or as productive as I thought I was, and they tolerated me.

RITCHIE: How different was it working for a newspaper than for a magazine?

TAMES: How different was it? Well, for one thing, in your analysis of the news, say if I made a statement to you on a Monday, *Time* Magazine would not try to print it until Friday for next Monday's issue. They had a whole week for this statement that you made to be developed. You know, many times the reporter has to run with something that is being told to him verbatim. He has to use his own judgment as to whether this is true, or what other source he goes into. The magazine reporter was a little more leisurely. He had time to pick up the paper the next day and see exactly how you wrote it, and what you thought, and got his own sources. You have a tendency to lay down on the hustle and bustle and the five o'clock deadline, when you've got a weekly deadline. It's a snobbish thing. Of course, we all want to be better or considered better than the other guy, and do our little thing.

RITCHIE: What about as a photographer?

TAMES: Photographers did the same thing. As a magazine photographer, say for *Life* Magazine, you're covering the world, you're covering all the figures, you're covering the whole higher spectrum of political life. The newspaper photographer, he wasn't covering anything. It's only been in the last twenty years that the *Washington Post*--less than twenty years--that they have had a photographer full-time at the White House or the Capitol. Jim Atherton is up there now, and he's been doing a good job for many years for them. They have a permanent person at the White House. They cover the State Department, they cover the national news. They've just covered the local horse races and handshakes and bar mitzvahs and what have you. You know, they didn't have the opportunity. You look down on somebody like that, just like the old foreign correspondents used to look down on the fellows who never went overseas. They talked to world leaders, woh, oh, oh.

RITCHIE: What kind of marching orders did you get? Did they tell you what stories were breaking that day and they wanted pictures to go with them? Or did they send you out on your own?

TAMES: On my own, right from the beginning. It was hard going. That's how I learned how

to cover the news. I had to be able to read the papers, and I had a routine set up which I've only managed to break in the last year since I've been retired. That's simply you catch the eleven p.m. news, the latest breaking news, you catch the seven a.m. news. You're on the Hill between eight and eight-thirty in the morning, and you go down to the Senate coffee shop and see which senators are there early. I used to be able to find Mike Mansfield in there, Senator Stennis, as a rule both of them were in there. Then Senator Aiken, and a few of the other old timers. I'd look and see if they were in conference or alone, and I'd sit with them and ask them what's going down today? Could I come in on it? What does it look like? That's the way it was done.

Then during the morning after you see what the senators are doing, you walk over to the House leadership, stick your head into the Speaker's office and see what's happening over there. You get a feeling of how the legislation is going. But if you expect to sit back and have some one tell you, "Go over and make a picture of the Speaker, because they're going to be voting today," you're not ahead of it. You're lost. It's already happened. I've had photographers show up on the Hill at nine-thirty, quarter of ten, asking me what's happening, and I've already done my job. I've already covered the main story of the day. The members are usually moving a lot faster than the average person gives them credit for.

RITCHIE: So you have to anticipate what the reporters will be working on?

TAMES: Oh, yes. In fact, many a time I've told the reporters what's happening. I discovered early that the *Times* would not run a picture of mine unless they had a story to go with it. Today they are more likely to run one without a story with it, however, I would say: "This is what's happening, and I've just made a picture of so and so." I've gone into Senator Baker's office when he was Majority Leader and asked him about certain events. He'd say, "I haven't even thought about that." I'd say, "You'd better start thinking about it, because it's coming up!" I was anticipating. You could say things to him or to anyone and they knew that you didn't mean it disrespectfully. You were just anticipating. Once you get a reputation like that around town, they're more likely to open up to you anyway.

And the fact that I'm with the *New York Times* didn't hurt me, I assure you. There was never any doubt in my mind that if George Tames had been representing the *Alexandria Gazette*, he never would have had the entree that George Tames of the *New York Times* has. I've always felt that George Tames was just the prow of the icebreaker, and that the *New York Times* was the full weight of the ship behind me. That's how I got in. Some members of our profession acquire the feeling that it's they themselves that are doing all these marvelous things, and the fact that they are with the *New York Times* is incidental, or any other papers, that it's just them. But they soon discover, once they've gone, that the phone stops ringing, the invitations stop coming, and who they thought were friends of theirs were really just acquaintances. They were just tolerating you, not only for what they could get out of you, but what you could do to them--what you could do for them, and what you could do against them. Thank you.

RITCHIE: Well, thank you.

TAMES: I don't know, this is just rambling.

RITCHIE: No, no. It's a matter of one thought associating with the next, and I'm getting a very good picture of the time and place, and what the work was like.

TAMES: One of the things that I remember more than anything else is the wonderful times we had at the Senate dining room, at the press dining table. These were the years from '48 up until '61 or '62, when I used to make a practice of eating lunch every day at the Senate, at the same time, at the same table, at the press table. It was a wonderful, stimulating event, because of the jokes, the information. Also we were served by Mr. King, the waiter, who was a wonderful person, sweet tempered. He knew that I liked lemon meringue pie, and ever Friday, the Senate Bakery would bake these wonderful lemon meringue pies, and Mr. King would always take a big slice of one and put it aside for me. I would call him from wherever I was in the country because I knew he was expecting me there on Friday. I'd say, "Mr. King, I won't be in today, you better sell that piece of pie." He'd say, "Mr. George, you're not going to be in? Are you sure you're not going to be? I'll save it for you. Even if your late, I'll put it aside, you just come on up." I'd say, "I'm in California, I will not be in." "All right, Mr. George, I'll see you next week." Mr. King was an ex-vaudeville hooper with his sister, who in his latter years got a job as a waiter there for the press table. He was beloved by everyone. In fact, if you go up to the Senate dining room, there's a plaque on the wall, a tribute to him signed by quite a few members. He was a great person.

I think that's something else--the staff, the policemen, everyone was on a much looser basis. The awful feelings of tension, and the security, it's an entirely different atmosphere now. I just don't like it, but I don't know what to do with it. I was walking by the White House the other day, and I see they're putting barricades up in the street. What are we coming to? Antitank barricades facing the White House. Next think you know they'll want to build a Kremlin. They'll want to put a wall all the way around Lafayette Park and the president's house and we'll be like the Russians. I don't know what the answer is, but I feel that I was there at the right time and was able to record in my own way the events.

I've always felt very close to the presidents, from Truman to Carter. I felt less close to Roosevelt, who was my first president, and to Reagan. Coming out of California that way, I never got to know him, just a few times at conventions. Here it's been seven years of Reagan's presidency and I still don't know him. Here's a president who goes every weekend--every weekend--to Camp David. He has been away from Washington more than any other president that I have had anything to do with. I just wonder what he does up there, other than look at the beautiful scenery. I know Camp David. I've walked that whole area many, many times before World War II, because a friend of mine's grandfather owned about twenty acres up on that mountain. We used to camp out there, so I'm very

familiar with that area. I've always wondered what he did up there.

The *New York Times*, ever since I've been on the staff, starting with Truman, has asked every president to list their ten favorite books. Which books are your favorite? Which books do you consider the ones that have shaped your life? Or have followed the general trend of your thoughts? You find out a lot about a person from what books they read, or which ones they like and which ones they keep around and pick up again and read later, or remember a passage from. But we never did that with Reagan.

There's a beautiful view up at Camp David. If I recall, we used to climb up on a rock overlooking the little valley there. On your right is Frederick, and the whole wide panorama of the trail through the Cumberland Gap, where so many people went west in the early history of the United States. And over on the left, if you looked on a clear day, you could see Gettysburg, where the high tide of the Confederacy finally broke on that hill there, Little Round Top. And I always wondered, what does Reagan think when he sits up there? Does he wonder: where do I belong in all of this? How do I fit in this? What will history think of me? Does he sit on a rock or a stump, reach in his back pocket and pull out a copy of his favorite poet, and dream a bit, muse a bit, and then be recharged and come back Sunday afternoon to Washington, ready to tackle the world. But I still don't know him. I felt I had a handle on everyone of them, including Roosevelt, but not this guy.

RITCHIE: He's that much more removed from the press?

TAMES: He's not that removed from me, and he's pleasant to me. I can't say that he's been mean or refused any demands, or refused any requests--you don't demand anything of the president. Although sometimes it sounds like we're demanding, we really mean it to be a request. "Would you?" Sometimes we forget the word "please" in the push and shove. "Mr. President, do this, do that." He's never taken us to task, in fact, he's never showed any passion. Maybe that it. You have to have some passion.

RITCHIE: You told me a story once about trying to get him to show you how he made a decision.

TAMES: Yes, was that on the tape?

RITCHIE: No, that was before.

TAMES: Oh, gosh, that was a good one. I happened to remark to one of our reporters on the *Times* about this. He brought it up at a meeting and they decided to do it. They called it "The Mind of the President." A reporter went over and interviewed the president, and he came back shaking his head. But he sat down and very dutifully wrote a piece for the Magazine of the *New York Times*. So

they decided that I should go over and photograph him, sort of try to get a mood picture. Ever since I made that picture of Kennedy /"The Loneliest Job in the World"/ every publisher in the job always wants me to go back and make one like it. It's not there.

I put a request in, and I got a call back from Weinberg, who said, "You've got eleven minutes." That's a lot of time. I said, "I want a one-on-one." They said sure. I went over and I took an assistant with me so he could put up some lights. The first thing that happened when we walked over, there were three people from the press office in the room, one TV crew, and one still photographer. A total of nine people; ten with the president. How can you get a one-on-one? I was trying to get a mood picture, trying to talk him into something. Anyway, I finally said, "I'm ready." And I had taken his chair and pulled it away from the desk, and had it by the window. They called him in, and he walked in very briskly. The first thing he does is grab his chair and pull it to his desk. He sits down and starts looking up and me and giving me one-liners, bing, bing, bing. I'm laughing, I'm loving the jokes. I made a few shots of him smiling like that. Finally, we just weren't getting anywhere, because he just kept the jokes going. I said, "Excuse me, Mr. President. This is a very serious piece we're doing. It's called the mind of the president. The whole concept of it is how you make decisions. How do you come to conclusions? When someone presents a very difficult position paper to you, and you read it, how do you make up your mind? Do you scratch your chin? Do you suck on a pencil? Do you get up and walk around? Do you walk out in the garden and check the roses and come back in? How do you do that?" And the whole time he was looking at me. /Makes expression./

RITCHIE: With sort of a blank stare?

TAMES: Just a blank stare looking at me. Then when I stopped, he said, "I never do any of those things." So I said, "Don't do it for me." And I turned to the press officer and I said, "Thank you, I've got enough." He said, "You've got five more minutes." I said, "I don't need it. This is all I'm going to get out of this." We started breaking down our gear, and I learned long ago that like a good soldier you never fire your last rounds in your chamber, you always keep a couple just for emergencies, and that as you back towards a door you keep your camera ready. I was just backing away, and backing away, and shuffling my feet, and delaying the departure as long as possible, so that I was literally the last person out the door. As I did so, he had been reading while we were packing up, he picked up the papers, and stood up, and faced the window, and just started flipping them over. From the door I made the shot that we used. It was like pulling teeth.

We ran it full page in the *New York Times* with our story. The *USIA America* magazine called and they used it full page for the Russian edition. They used it everywhere. There are not that many real candid shots of this president, and it's so unusual because here is a person who has been in the movies and the theatrical end of the business for so many years. He cannot get into a natural looking situation. Everything looks contrived. He doesn't have any passion. He doesn't seem to project forcefully. I haven't read anything that he's written that has really stirred me or set me afire. Sometimes

I wonder, maybe the Oscar nominating committees were correct. He's never given an Oscar performance, whether as an actor or as president.

Well, that's one man's opinion.

End Interview #2